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ABSTRACT

Survey data were gathered from 218 Black, Jewish, and other nonblack respondents in a study that examined the relationships between knowledge of specific facts related to the Palestinian/Israeli conflict in the Middle East and the respondents' education, ethnicity, religion, media use, exposure to related news items, and interest in world affairs. Knowledge of Palestinian/Israeli affairs was measured by six true-false questions regarding Palestinian figures and events, and six questions regarding Israeli figures and events. Media use was measured through self-reports of newspaper reading and viewing of television news and public affairs programs. Education was measured through self-reports of years of schooling completed, and interest in world affairs was determined by a yes or no response to a question about discussing world affairs with family and friends. Results revealed differences between respondents in education and media use, with Blacks less likely than Jews or other nonblacks to use newspapers or newsmagazines on a regular basis. Blacks also had a lower level of education than other participants in the survey. Regression analyses revealed that race and ethnicity made no independent contribution to foreign affairs knowledge once exposure to related stories, dependence upon print sources, and education had been removed as sources of variance. Similar analysis revealed that when education and interest in world affairs were controlled, race and ethnicity made no independent contribution to variance in print media use. (Author/HOD)

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The Knowledge Gap and Foreign Affairs: Factors Associated with Differential Knowledge of the Palestinian/Israeli Conflict.

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ABSTRACT:

This study examines the relationships between knowledge of specific facts related to the Palestinian/Israeli Conflict in the Middle East and respondent's education, ethnicity, religion, media use, exposure to related news items and interest in world affairs. Completed telephone surveys (n=218) were gathered from black (23.4%), Jewish (22%) and other non-black respondents in January, 1984. Knowledge of Palestinian/Israeli affairs was measured by six true-false questions regarding Palestinian figures and events, and six questions regarding Israeli figures and events. Composite scores were computed for overall knowledge measures. Media use was measured through self report of newspaper reading and viewing of television news and public affairs programs. Composite scores for print and television media use were computed. Education was measured through self-report of years of schooling completed, and interest in world affairs was measured by a yes or no response to a question about discussing world affairs with family and friends.

There were important differences between respondents in education and media use with blacks less likely than Jews or other non-blacks to utilize newspapers or newsmagazines on a regular basis. Blacks were also likely to have a lower level of education than other participants in the survey. This dependence upon television news, reinforced by the educational deficit was reflected in a singificant knowledge gap between black and non-black respondents. Regression analyses reveal that race and ethnicity make no independent contribution to foreign affairs knowledge once exposure to related stories, dependence upon print sources, and education have been removed as sources of variance. Similar analyses reveal that when one controls for education and interest in world affairs, race and ethnicity make no independent contribution to variance in print media use, but being white or Jewish predicts less dependence on television news.

This study concludes that there is a significant knowledge gap in the area of world affairs attributed largely to education, which produces interest in world affairs, and greater exposure to information about those affairs in the more informative print media.

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

The knowledge Gap and Foreign Affairs: Factors Associated with Differential Knowledge of the Palestinian/Israeli Conflict.

Since its initial formulation by Phillip Tichenor, the knowledge gap hypothesis has stimulated numerous studies of the conditions under which differential knowledge will be generated by increased media coverage (9). For the originators of the construct, knowledge gaps and their maintenance are part of a process of social control. Information is associated with power and characteristics of the social system operate to restrict the access of low status groups to this source of power. Education is seen as the primary limiting factor in that education produces both the interest and the skills necessary to extract information from mass media systems oriented toward high status groups (3,4,9). With the continued decline in newspaper readership, and a correlated increase in television use (8,11), where television has been consistently revealed to be less informative (10), it becomes important to determine the extent to which this trend reinforces disparities in knowledge and social power. A study of public knowledge of aspects of the recent and continuing conflict in the Middle East (2) makes it possible for us to address some of these issues.

Understanding Knowledge Gaps

Differential knowledge in the face of increased media coverage of issues or events is a reflection of differences in exposure to and comprehension of the information contained in media. There are however, several routes through which such differentiation can occur, and variance in the specification of these factors accounts for some of the conflicting interpretations of the nature of the process (9,10). Exposure measures continue to be the source of

meaningful debates about the comparability of treatment conditions. Where some studies attempt to include consideration of the amount of attention respondents pay to news items (12), others report no exposure measures at all (6). A fair number of studies have sought to specify demographic bases for differentiation in media use or exposure (1,5,8,10,13), and most have interpreted those differences as being a function of education with regard to print media, and availability to view with regard to television use. Some racial and ethnic differences in media use remain, even after education and availability considerations have been taken.

Once we are able to account for differences in exposure, we are still faced with substantial differentiation in understanding or recall of the information presented. Even though the structure of television news is such that it severly limits the amount of information that can be presented, it is clear that very little of the information is understood or retained for very long (3,7,12,14). Here again, education is seen as an important factor in explaining differential comprehension of television news material. Findahl and Höijer (3) describe television news as "news for the initiated" because news stories tend to assume a broad familiarity with the background or history of the story. For most viewers, without that background, comprehension is difficult, and only a specific interest or motivation will spur viewers to struggle with unfamiliar and difficult material. John Stauffer and his colleagues (12) actually asked viewers in advance to pay particular attention to the evening's newscast. While this cueing produced significantly greater recall than was demonstrated by those not cued, the overall level of recall was quite low. They suggested that because most of the stories were about foreign conflicts (Iran), the respondents rated the news items as relatively low in relevance to them, and therefore they were less highly motivated to structure their processing of this news. This interpretation is consistent with the information processing models which suggest that familiar items will be remembered more easily because they can be stored

in "networks" established through daily experience (14).

The question of familiarity with, or interest in news items as a determining factor in comprehension or recall of news has been addressed by Genova and Greenberg (6). Two kinds of interest were defined: 1) self-interest was reflected in respondents' indication that news stories were important in their own lives, their work, or for someone close to them; 2) social interest was reflected in respondents' indication that they had discussed the events with friends and associates. Interest was determined to be more important than education in predicting knowledge of news events. It should be noted however, that since subjects were not asked about their exposure to news, and, perhaps more importantly, discussion of events with others is a source of information, the relationship between interest and knowledge may not have been fully specified in the model as presented. This conclusion is further warranted by the report that self-interest, a measure unrelated to information gathering, was relatively unimportant as a predictor of knowledge gain.

Several studies have given some consideration to the nature of the issues about which knowledge was seen to vary (9,10). It appears to matter whether the issues are local or national, or whether there is conflict involved. It has generally been found that where there is local conflict, there are more narrow gaps. A reasonable interpretation of such findings is that there is greater self-interest, and through that greater motivation to "make sense" out of the news, and to discuss it with family, friends and associates. It is not however conflict itself which is at the basis of this narrowing of the knowledge gap. Stories of national politics are almost by definition about conflict, but the gaps in knowledge are more likely to appear between status groups with regard to such stories. For gaps to be reduced as a result of increased coverage of conflict at the national or international level, there would have to be some basis for identification of self-interest on the part

of the media audience. Thus it is likely that for black people, the conflict inherent in the candidacy of the Reverend Jesse Jackson, while national in scope, is likely to be seen as relevant to the lives of black people in general, and we might expect to see a narrowing of the knowledge gap between high and low status blacks. Similarly, we might expect that Jewish Americans might identify to some extent with the fortunes of Israel, and because of this perceived self-interest, pay more attention to news of the continuing conflict in the Middle East. It was also considered possible that the visibility of Black Muslims in the United States might result in some identification with the plight of the Palestinians on the part of black Americans, thereby reducing the gap between blacks and Jews which might be expected on the basis of educational differences. The increased coverage of the Palestinian/Israeli conflict, including the invasion of Lebanon and the subseqeunt massacre of Palestinians at Sabra and Shatila made it possible to pursue these questions.

The Study

In January, 1984, a random sample of households in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area was contacted by telephone. Out of 396 accurate telephone numbers generated by random numbers within selected exchanges, 178 (45%) households refused to participate. Of the 218 completed interviews, 23% were black, and 22% identified themselves as being Jewish. Respondents were asked about their education, their interest in world affairs, their exposure to specific newspapers, newsmagazines and television news and public affairs programs. Additionally they were asked about their exposure to specific stories or aspects of the Palestinian/Israeli conflict, and their knowledge of these participants or events was tested by a series of open-ended questions which were scored as being correct or not.

The sample was fairly well educated with more than 33% finishing four or more years of college, and nearly 20% with masters or doctoral degrees. Interest

in world affairs was measured by two questions: whether they discussed world affairs with others, and whether they attended lectures on world affairs issues. The great majority of respondents reported discussing world affairs with others (86.7%), while a still substantial proportion (38.6%) reported that they attended lectures on these issues.

Newspaper readership was measured by asking respondents to indicate which of four popular papers they read at least four times each week, and the Washington Post was the most popular paper, being read by nearly 90 percent of the sample on a regular basis. Twenty-two percent of this well educated sample reported reading the New York Times regularly. When asked similar questions about their reading of popular newsweeklies, Time magazine was identified most frequently, read regularly by 44%, followed by Newsweek (36.2%) and U.S. News (17%).

Exposure to television news was quite varied in this sample. When asked how many times they watched television news in the evenings, 62.3% reported watching at least five times each week. Additionally, respondents were asked to indicate which of several news and public affairs programs they watched regularly. Night Line was the most popular, viewed regularly by more than 30% of the sample.

Before being asked specific questions about Palestinian and Israeli events and personalities, respondents were asked if they had heard or read about these matters. Responses to these items were coded as dichotomous dummy variables.

The Knowledge Gap and Foreign Affairs

As indicated in Table One, there is a direct relationship between exposure to information and knowledge about the Palestinian/Israeli conflict. Of the information sources, Attending lectures (dummy variable) is the most important

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Table One

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source of information leading to knowledge about the conflict. In general, the relationship between use of information sources and knowledge appears to be slightly stronger for those items identified as "Israeli" rather than "Palestinian." Television news, a composite of evening news and public affairs programs is relatively unimportant as a source of knowledge one is likely to recall--the relationship is significant only with regard to Israeli items.

When race and ethnicity are measured as dummy variables, the results are stark reflections of a wide knowledge gap. Whereas being white, or being Jewish is positively correlated with knowledge of Palestinian/Israeli events and personalities, being black is even more strongly, but negatively correlated with such knowledge. As we examine some of the relationships with exposure variables, the source of this gap becomes clear. For those exposure variables which are positively associated with foreign affairs knowledge, all are found to be negatively correlated with being black. While television news is only marginally related to knowledge, blacks in the sample were more likely to report heavy television use.

Regression analysis was utilized in an attempt to further isolate factors which were more heavily involved in the production of such striking gaps in knowledge. For this analysis, several composite variables were computed. Overall

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Table Two

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knowledge (KNOW) was computed as the sum of correct responses to both Israeli and Palestinian questions. A similar exposure variable (EXPOSE) was computed as the sum of reported exposure to information about Israeli and Palestinian events and personalities. Dummy variables for race and ethnicity were created such

that respondents that identified themselves as being white, but did not select Jewish as their religious affiliation, were identified as WHITE. A summary measure of the number of newspapers respondents identified as reading regularly was computed (PNEWS), and a similar measure of television news use was computed (TVNEWS) by adding the amount of evening and public affairs programs viewed regularly. Table two presents the solutions of several regression equations designed to examine different paths to foreign affairs knowledge.

The last equation predicting knowledge includes eight predictor variables and explains more than 60 percent of the variance in the composite knowledge measure. As indicated by the size of the beta coefficients, the most important contributor is exposure to information about the Palestinian/Israeli conflict. The more respondents indicate that they had been exposed to specific information, the more likely they were to answer related questions correctly. The amount of education and the number of newspapers read regularly were significant, but of rather limited importance as independent contributors to knowledge. We should note here that the race and ethnicity measures make no significant, independent contribution to knowledge once we have controlled for education and respective exposure variables.

When we examine specific knowledge models, Iknow and Pknow, both are significant, even though they contain only the race/ethnicity measures. In both equations, the signs of the coefficients for the dummy variable BLACK are negative, while those for WHITE and JEWISH are positive. While not significant, the coefficients for JEWISH are higher than those for WHITE. Thus we see, absent other considerations, race and ethnicity do predict variance in knowledge, or the existence of knowledge gaps.

If we consider that education is a positive contributor to knowledge, then it is useful to determine the importance of race and ethnicity as predictors of educational attainment. This three variable equation explains approximately 21%

of the variance in years of education, with virtually all of the variance captured by the variable indicating whether the respondent is black or not.

Although when other factors are controlled for, knowledge appears to be unrelated to television news exposure, white and Jewish respondents are less likely to utilize television news. Race and ethnicity appear to be unrelated to differences in use of newspapers, although without considering the influence of education ($Pnews_1$), blacks appear to be considerably less likely to read several papers. When education is controlled for ($Pnews_2$) the relationship between being black and reading newspapers drops to near zero.

The first equation indicates that exposure to information about foreign affairs is primarily associated with education--the higher one's education, the more likely one is to read or hear about the Palestinian/Israeli conflict. As newspapers and discussions are also sources of information about this conflict, the significant positive coefficients for these variables are not unexpected.

Figure one may be seen as a general model of the path through which knowledge of Palestinian/Israeli issues is acquired. Race appears to be the dominant factor

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Figure One

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involved in educational attainment. Educational attainment appears to be the dominant factor in determining exposure in general, as well as exposure to detailed information in newspapers . While exposure then emerges as the most important predictor of knowledge, education and newspaper use remain important independent contributors to knowledge of the Palestinian/Israeli conflict. Being Jewish is not, of itself an important contributor to knowledge, rather the path for Jewish respondents appears to be through education, rather than through some unspecified identification with Israel.

Discussion

This study sought to contribute to our understanding of the factors involved in the production of knowledge gaps which are seen to emerge, or to widen when there is increased media coverage of significant events. The literature reviewed suggests that these gaps are the result of differential exposure to and comprehension of mass media content. Some studies have suggested that the primary factor involved is one of interest or motivation to gather and process information. Interest in these studies has not been well defined in operational terms. Often there is a tendency toward circularity--if people are interested, they will discuss it with their friends (if they don't, they must not have been interested). When the attempt to define interest locates it within the concept of personal relevance (6), the construct is seen to be only marginally related to knowledge or recall. This study does not move forward very far in specifying this interest variable

Discussion with others, which is defined as social interest by Genova and Greenberg (6) is seen to be positively and significantly related to knowledge of the Palestinian/Israeli conflict. But, we have suggested that when measured this way, discussion with others is not so much a measure of interest, but an index of exposure to information. And, as such, discussion with others is less important than newspaper use, magazine use, and substantially less important than attending lectures on world affairs (Table One).

In this study we have inferred some degree of personal interest on the basis of ethnic or historic identification with participants in the Middle Eastern conflict. We assumed that Jews would identify closely with Israel, and thereby have in interest in gathering and interpreting information about Israel's status. We were somewhat less confident of the links between blacks and Palestinians on the basis of familiarity with Islam, and reports of conflicts between blacks and Jews in the U.S. The expectation that such

interest would result in less of a knowledge gap between blacks and Jews found no support at all. Indeed, blacks and Jews anchored the ends of the distribution of knowledge of this conflict.

What we did discover, however, is that education remains the most important element in a system of social control which maintains social inequities in both knowledge and power. Education is the primary factor explaining differential exposure to information about the Palestinian/Israeli conflict. Black Americans appear to have been barred from such exposure as a function of their relative educational deprivation. It would seem that education provides both the interest and the skills necessary to seek out and make sense out of fragmentary news reports. At the same time, education provides the insights necessary to see that there is indeed some real, personal self-interest involved in the outcome of events happening thousands of miles away. Because of their educational deficit, blacks in the U.S. have been condemned to fall further and further behind until they form the broad base of the information underclass.

It is of course true that this small sample of Washington, D.C. residents is not representative of the U.S. in general. The metropolitan area has a very highly educated population of young white professionals who are surrounded by a larger population of impoverished blacks whose collective social indicators of the quality of their lives are among the lowest in the nation. It remains the truth, however, that black Americans have the least in terms of resources, and the most in terms of needs in almost any community in which they are found.

Studies of the knowledge gap phenomenon are important to our understanding of the nature of social power (5,9), and as media usage continues to move away from print, and toward the electronic media--especially television with its segmented, homogeneous, perhaps even segregated audiences--we may discover the emergence of even greater gaps between the haves and the have-nots.

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Table One

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN RACE, ETHNICITY, MEDIA USE, EXPOSURE, INTEREST AND KNOWLEDGE OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS
(Kendall's Tau C, decimals dropped)

	Pknow	Iknow	Education	Newspapers	Newsmagazines	TVnews	Discuss	Lectures
Being Jewish	23***	21***	26***	11*	15**	-06	04	01
Being White	25***	25***	31***	05	09	-28***	01	03
Being Black	-38***	-27***	-39***	-13*	-23***	13*	-01	-05
Education	41***	37***						
TV News	05	12**						
Newspapers	26***	30***						
Newsmagazines	16***	24***						
Discussion	16***	16***						
Lectures	35***	42***						

Pknow= knowledge of Palestinian items (summary measure)
Iknow= knowledge of Israeli items(summary measure)

* $p \leq .05$

** $p \leq .01$

*** $p \leq .001$

Table Two

REGRESSION EQUATIONS PREDICTING EXPOSURE AND KNOWLEDGE REGARDING PALESTINIAN/ISRAELI ISSUES

(Standardized beta coefficients, decimals dropped)

Criterion	Predictors								
	BLACK	WHITE	JEWISH	EDUCAT	EXPOSE	DISCUSS	PNEWS	TVNEWS	R^2
Expose				40***		16**	16**	09	.306***
$Discuss_1$	06	06	13						.007
$Discuss_2$	10	07	11	09					.014
$Pnews_1$	-18	-09	03						.029
$Pnews_2$	-02	-08	-04	39***		11			.168**
$TVnew_1$	-06	-26*	-23						.038*
$TVnew_2$	-06	-27*	-26*	05		17*			.069**
Education	-42***	-07	13						.211***
Iknow	-18	08	21						.103**
Pknow	-32**	06	18						.180**
Knowledge	-05	03	06	13*	58***	06	12*	01	.607***

* $p \leq .05$
** $p \leq .01$
*** $p \leq .001$

Figure One

MODEL OF THE PATH THROUGH EDUCATION TO KNOWLEDGE OF PALESTINIAN/ISRAELI CONFLICT